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Implicit in the concept of immediate reinforcement are two assumptions: 1) that a need must be satisfied; and 2) that a reward can serve to satisfy this need. The culturally disadvantaged child needs encouragement or discouragement right away. His society operates in this way. In the classroom, such reinforcement may take many forms. One teacher used trading stamps in place of grades. The stamps had a more concrete meaning to these children.

The mental style of the culturally disadvantaged child requires considerably more ego reinforcement than is required by the middle-income child. Display of the children's work on bulletin boards with their photographs placed alongside fosters a great degree of ego-reinforcement in culturally disadvantaged children. Non-verbal teacher reactions can be quite effective. Role playing emphasizes real situations for these children. Allowing the child to perceive a problem immediately through the speedy feedback of test grades involves him in the diagnosis of his own achievement.

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URBAN TEACHER PREPARATION

PROGRAM

Syracuse University Ford Foundation Syracuse Public Schools

IMMEDIATE REINFORCEMENT AND THE DISADVANTAGED LEARNER

A Practical Application of Learning Theory

by

Dr. Mario Fantini
and
Gerald Weinstein

One of the basic prinicples in eduzation, which has been identified as a result of intensive inquiry into the learning process, concerns the immediate reinforcement of soughtfor behavior; i.e., that desired behavior is rewarded at once. Pavlow, B. F. Skinner of Harvard, and many others have developed this principle in well-known experiments with animals.

In its most unsophisticated form, for example, an experimenter who wants a pigeon to step to the left contrls the reinforcement to the degree that only when the bird oves left is the reward immediately forthcoming. In a short time, the pigeon may be taught to exhibit even more complex patterns of behavior, such as dancing. The orbit around the earth of Enos, the "chimpanaut," offers another impressive example of this learning principle. Enos was taught to manipulate certain controls in response to colored flashes of light. Once this behavior was exhibited successfully, a reward of banana-flavored pellets was immediately forthcoming.

Implicit in this concept of immediate reinforcement are two assumptions: 1) that ther is some need which can be satisfied, and 2) that a reward can serve to satisfy this need. In working with animals, the need is usually physiological, such as hunger which is rewarded with food. In working with human beings, however, we must rely on certain psychological or social needs. These might be pres-

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tige, recognition, success, and the like, and the reward symbols which seem to satisfy these wants; e.g., money, the letter grade of "A", a verbal "very good," etc. Nevertheless, the principle of immediate reinforcement in learning is applicable to both man and beast, chimp or child-- -and in particular to the culturally deprived child.

What is it that makes immediate reinforcement particularly suited to the disadvantaged child? First, let me say, that disadvantaged children are <u>not</u> learning successfully as much as they could be from the schools. They <u>are</u>, however, learning from the street corner curricoulum- or "hidden " curriculum--such values as living on welfare being a bookie and driving a "'64 chine"--a new car, "cutting out" when they spot the "Fuzz" leaving when the police are around. Why is it they learn from this curriculum and not from the school's?

One of the reasons is that in the street corner curriculum the child learns as a matter of sheer survival within his society. If he displays undesired behavior here, the reprimands are immediate-- and forceful; if he displays what is deemed by his peers the "right" behavior, the rewards too are immediate.

Essentially, the learning styles of these children differ from those of the middle class. The mental style of the culturally deprived child requires that considerably more ego-reinforcement be given to him than is required by the middle income child. He <u>needs</u> encouragement right away or discouragement right away, for this is how his society operates.

To be specific, those children who fall into the category "culturally deprived" are typically ill at ease and uncertain in the

classroom. These traits too frequently manifest themselves in aggressive, even hostile behavior. It is these children who will benefit from the sense of direction that is given them by immediate reinforcement.

On several occasions, we have witnessed the utilization of this principle within lower-income classrooms. The example which stands out mostly in our minds concerned a group of lower-income mentally retarded children. The teacher experimented with ways to develop a behavior change in these children in the direction of exhibiting good manners. She proceeded to organize the following strategy: the name of each child was printed on the chalkboard; immediately following any demonstration of good manners by any child, a star was drawn with colored chalk next to his name. Soon there was "catching on" by the children and a deliberate attempt was made to perform in that manner which would beget a reward. Consistent use of this method resulted in a sharp increase in demonstration of good manners patterns in these children.

The same teacher became so adapt at maintaining classroom control that many children with behavior problems were assigned to her class. To the amazement of the other teachers and the administration, the problem child in question soon learned to conform to peer values, to exhibit behavior that would beget reward, and in turn became a genuine exhibitionist of good manners. Thus, every time there was a "good morning," "thank you," "excuse me," etc., a star- -literally and figuratively- -was born.

Another example, particularly successful with the culturally deprived is the technique of giving many spot quizzes from which the <u>feedback follows immediately</u>. This should be done not so much to

evaluate in terms of a grade as to allow the child to see his proble immediately (i.e., to see where he was right or wrong and to give him perspective and a more accurate idea of how far he is from the goal or objective). Conversely, the entire practice of testing in which students are asked a series of questions in a paper and pencil examination, followed by teacher correction involving days or weeks, runs counter to the principle, since the reinforcement, if any, of having the corrected answer takes place not immediately but rather after a long period of delay.

Possibilities for concrete rewards are innumerable in these instances. In the case of testing, we have seen that instead of a letter grade, a reward of commercial trading stamps which can be cashed in for material goods seem to have more tangible meaning to "object oriented" deprived children. Such a reward symbol is unquestionably congruent with their needs.

However, the most striking reward is that of an individual photograph--especially one showing the child in a positive learning situation. In addition to the child's own work being displayed on a bulletin board, photographs of him with his name clearly visible below them may be put next to his work. This not only fosters the image of the positive learning situation--behavior which we want to encourage, it also gives the deprived child, who typically suffers from lack of a positive self image, a great degree of ego-reinforcement.

Immediate reinforcement may be conveyed non-verbally in the form of a smile, frown, a look of calm disdain, a slow nodding of the head, and other facial expressions which represent comments like: "not bad," "I'm not so sure about that," "go on, continue," etc. The

facility with which a teacher can non-verbally guide or probe a student while the student is speaking, is indicative of the teacher's awareness of subtle immediate reinforcement. How reassuring it must be for a deprived child, who typically struggles when orally relating an impression, to receive an encouraging nod or smile! Similarly, a pat on the back (an action which realizes the deprived child's characteristically physical-orientation) acts as an immediate reinforcement. From this slight physical contact, the child learns at once that the teacher is on his side, is proud of him, or agrees with him.

Role playing as an immediate reinforcement mechanism is extremely successful with, as Frank Reissman calls them, "the action-oriented," culturally deprived. If a child walks in front of the teacher without saying "excuse me," the teacher immediately engages him in role playing in order to dramatically drive home this breach of manners. The peer group itself might be asked to evaluate a role playing situation. A child might be instructed to dramatize how he would diplomatically go about changing the television channel that his sister is watching. By inviting the class' immediate analysis of his techniques, there would be on-the spot reinforcement by peers.

The principle to which we have addressed ourselves thus far seems to be so basic that it has become a major justification for programmed learning. The teaching machine which has been finding its way into school practices is largely based on the concept of immediate reinforcement. Here the learner is able to receive immediate response to his behavior because of the structure of the device. Interestingly enough, because the learner is actually in competition with himself, the reward which seems most to motivate

his performance is success in achievement; it is this motion of self-competition that needs to be reinforced in the culturally deprived child.

By using immediate reinforcement in urban schools, we are not suggesting that we will produce nothing more than conditioned "dancing pigeons," regimated automatons, or mechanical intellectual zombies. Far from it. What we will be doing is making an attempt to reorganize learning styles and shape our teaching methods so they are congruent in certain ways with those of lower income society--with the "hidden" curriculum from which the disadvantaged child seems to learn so rapidly.

Knowledge of the principle of immediate reinforcement, of its application, and of notions which tie motivation with certain psychological rewards, are valuable tools. If the urban teacher can use these tools when working with the culturally deprived, she will be working in a consistent attempt to translate theory into practice--as a guide to her professional appearance.

The day for exploring only common sense theory is rapidly vanishing. In light of the principles of learning which are emerging from current research, the teacher who clings to conventional wisdom with reference to learning is actually compromising with good teaching. And, the teacher in an urban setting who fails to utilize learning theory, thinking it inapplicable in ghetto or slum area, is surely lacking imagination and insight.

Taking this a step further, by allowing the child to see his immediate problem in the speedy feedback of test grades, we are actually involving him in diagnosis of his own achievement. As a

result, he measures his own progress and is aware at all times of where he stands in every skill area. He should be able to point out: "Here I am in reading....Here's where I was two months ago".